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A Walk By Night

Charles Denton

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

The story I have to tell is really quite simple. My name is Avidus and for many years I was an instructor in magic at the University of Al-Liban in the Desert Kingdom.

Keywords

Fiction; Mythellany; A Walk By Night; Charles Denton

The story I have to tell is really quite simple.

My name is Avidus and for many years I was an instructor in magic at the University of Al-Liban in the Desert Kingdom. I could have left it long before now, but it was comfortable. High in one of the school towers, I had a pleasant office which overlooked a park.

Commissioned by Gerald Lifebringer, the Desert Kingdom's greatest magician, the park is itself part of the University grounds. It is a busy place by day. Through my office window, I used to watch students stroll about discussing classes; journeyman orators declaiming verses; confection vendors plying their trades; the mercenaries patrolling to prevent trouble; and the birds twittering in the trees.

Sometimes the University elders permitted a festival in it. I never attended, but I heard the music if my window happened to be open. I must confess, it usually did "happen" that it was open during festival. They were very fine, I'd been told, but I felt that someone like myself could not possibly support with my actual presence such riotous behavior as occurred there. Dancing, for instance. The most I could condone was discrete foot tapping under my desk which could not possibly hurt anyone.

I remember observing the deserted park on nights when I worked late. Let me amend that to almost deserted. I would see lovers beneath the trees, often in full view of my window! I came to think it silly that the University rules governing such things drove the students to such inconveniences.

I also observed something else. I began to suspect I was growing apart from my students, becoming exactly the same kind of pompous fool I abhorred when I was young. I began to think an adventure might help me get in touch again with those "youthful" feelings. I was almost sure it would make me a better teacher.

Of course, one did not want too much adventure. Too much effort given to keeping alive in hard places takes away from the creative faculties. But, perhaps a walk by night in the park would be the *via media*. Perhaps I

would meet some of my students, perhaps some of the rowdier ones. Perhaps I would be invited to deface one or two of those smug University statues. They'd needed a randy slogan painted about their base for years. Perhaps I would have to kiss a female student. No, no, one just didn't kiss young people one had the care of. After all, I was highly regarded by the rest of the faculty. (I was forced to be very firm with myself on the subject of kissing someone during my hypothetical walk.)

It was then a remarkable thought occurred to me. Why need my considerations be hypothetical only? It was a fine spring evening. Adventure awaited me! Before I could change my mind, I hurried down the stairs that led to the back door which opened directly onto the park lawns.

I remember a light breeze ruffling my hair as I took the short walk that led into the trees. I gleefully pretended not to notice that it was a couple of my students kissing each other under a juniper bush not six yards from me.

Presently, I came to a large fountain which the University elders had placed in the center of the park. I remembered voting on the funds and approving the design, but had never actually seen it before. It was quite unexciting but for a group of cherubs playing in the jets of water. I sat down next to a very fetching young lady with energetic red hair. She appeared to be concentrating on her knitting, so I decided not to burden her with my conversation. Besides, I couldn't think of a suitable opening comment. Gradually, various, colorful, goblin lights became visible as night drew on. They reflected off the water and gave a dim, pretty atmosphere to the surrounding trees. They were worth every jezik spent on them, I thought.

"Those cherubs," I finally said to the young lady, "are really an impressive illusion. Whoever is responsible should be complimented."

She giggled, "Don't tell the cherubs that."
"Don't tell them what?"

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DENTON

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"That you think them an illusion; they'll splash you."
I frowned and drew down my eyebrows at this news.
"Are those real cherubs? On the University grounds?"

The girl nodded. I sighed. I'd have to tell the mercenaries about this and have the audacious things turned out. Even though cherubs were vain, silly, harmless, little things, trespassing was trespassing; they still had to obey the law. Right then, a breeze heavy with the scent of lilacs wafted by. I decided to wait till morning before mentioning the cherubs. Perhaps if they asked politely, they would be allowed to stay. Certainly, they gave the fountain a unique style.

I was still smiling over these thoughts when I felt a hand on my knee. It was quite an attractive hand, with well-formed fingers and tapering nails. It was attached to a well-shaped arm which in turn was attached to the young lady. She pretended not to notice my stare, but continued knitting with her other two hands. I tried to think of the correct protocol for this sort of thing. I thought the young lady might have another arm lurking about somewhere, but saw no indication. It felt peculiarly pleasant, but one cannot allow such things, so I tried outrage.

"Young lady, your conduct is most unbecoming."

She snatched away her hand which disappeared into her robe.

"I'm sorry," she said contritely, "you looked so -- distinguished, I just thought ..."

"You did not think," I said sternly. "You could be expelled for that."

"Oh, I am not a student here," the young lady pouted. It made her prettier than ever. "But I'm sorry I offended you, sir." A tear ran down her cheek and her knitting lay limp in her lap.

This annoyed me. I hate these kind of displays. On the other hand, what had she done? Only shown an overabundance of admiration in a rather surprising manner.

"My dear," I said gently, "Please don't cry. You--startled--me. I'm not used to this sort of--enthusiasm,

and--well, we don't even know one another."

She brightened immediately. Her third hand popped out and took my right one. "Let's become friends then," she said, "so I won't startle you next time. What would you like to talk about?"

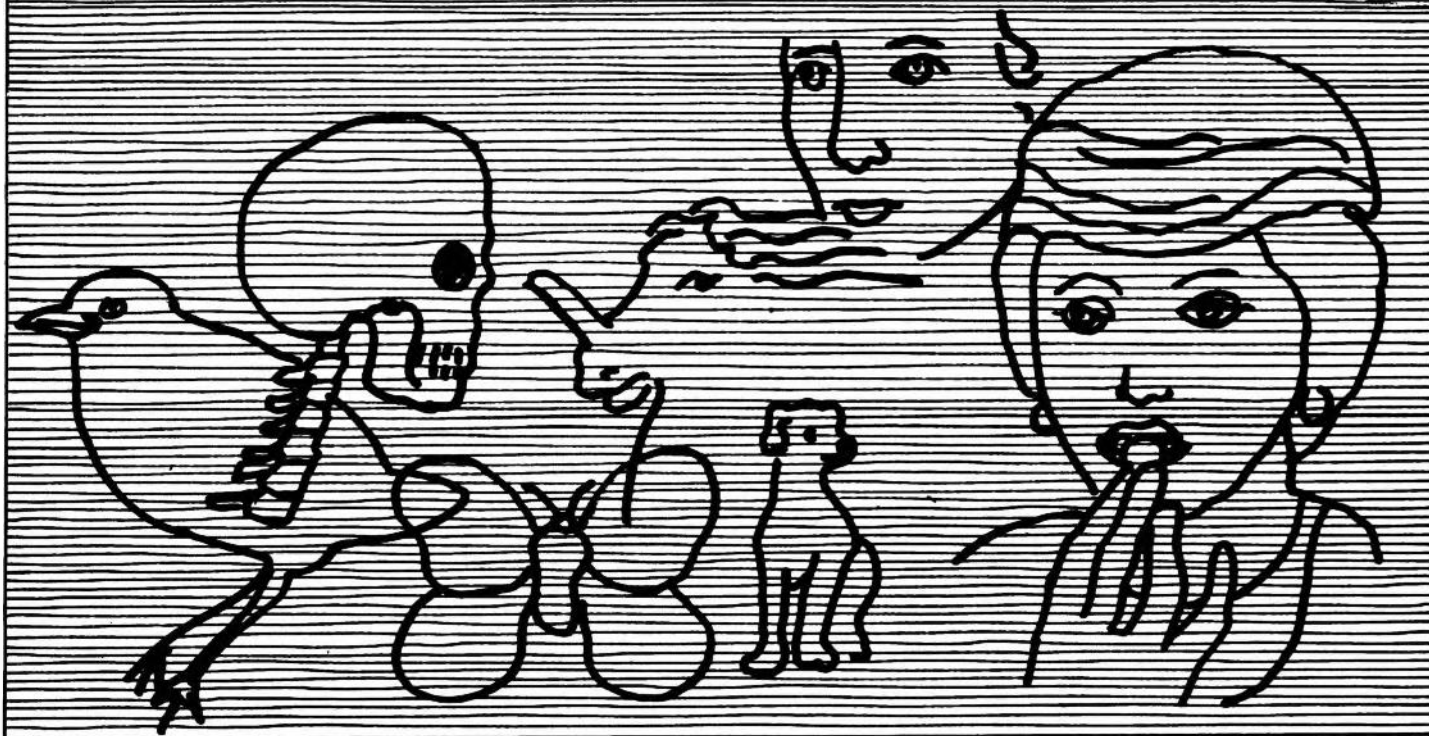
"Well--I--ah--can't spare you any time right now. I have--um, papers to grade. Yes, I have papers to grade. Later, hm?" I smiled regretfully (and shyly, I'm afraid) and rose.

"I come here every night to knit and watch the cherubs," she said. "Perhaps we could talk tomorrow?"

"Ah--yes, tomorrow," I agreed, and departed hastily. This was most irregular, I thought. What could such a lovely, young lady see in me? She did say I was distinguished, and I have shown a certain flair sometimes if I say so myself, but--quite possibly--she was lonely. That was it. I followed my hastily chosen path and thought of loneliness and extra hands.

A sudden, low whinny interrupted my reflections. A unicorn stepped onto the path behind me. Surely this was an illusion, I thought, for the last known living unicorn had been killed long ago in the Crystal Mountains. As an illusion, it was masterful and I clapped my hands in delight. Why, I could see the sparks struck by its platinum hooves as it walked across the flinty gravel. As it passed, it brushed against me. I felt its velvet coat and smelled its myrrh-like odor. A few yards off, it stopped and looked back, as if waiting for me to follow. I began to comply when at that precise moment, nature called. The unicorn answered. I shoved it away, and as I ruefully wiped my shoe on the grass, it gave me one more limpid glance before dashing into the bushes. That was no illusion, I grumbled to myself. I felt quite angry and a bit foolish about the misadventure until I thought of how astonished my colleagues would be when they heard I'd seen the last living unicorn. It wouldn't be necessary to tell them about the more mundane aspects of its habits.

Quite cheerfully, then, I continued along my little path which ended at a side entrance to a private section



of the University cemetery. In this particular corner, many past masters of the magical arts were buried. I wondered what the place was like, and whether I had seniority enough to be put here myself someday.

There was a human form just inside the gate. For a moment I thought it was a statue, another smug monument erected to someone who was past caring, but closer inspection proved me wrong.

"Seton, is that you?" I whispered.

"Master Avidus?" the surprised sentry gasped.

"Yes, it's me. Seton, what are you doing here?"

"Guarding University grounds, sir," replied the sentry nervously.

"I see," I said. (I didn't yet.) "Keeping people out, eh?"

Seton laughed. "I wish it were that easy. Usually I spend all my time keeping them in."

I was about to ask what sort of people needed to be kept in a cemetery when he was interrupted by a voice. "If you let me out, good Seton," it whined, "I'll give you that spell which will have every woman within twenty miles chasing after you."

"Later," growled Seton urgently.

"But you promised on the last new moon of winter to allow me this night's freedommmmm...."

"I said later. Let me get rid of this old fool first. I could lose my job if I let you out now."

There was a sound that made wildly shrieking wind sound frivolous and wet plopping noises receded from the gate. I automatically clutched at my neck where my protective amulet should be. It was there! I must have forgotten to take it off the day before when I had concocted some magic with a colleague. Whew, how convenient!

Seton turned back to me. "Umm, just a joke, you understand? But about this keeping people out. Do you suppose you could arrange something? It might look good on my record."

"I'll see what I can do," I replied as I backed away. It would not be correct to say that I ran. I am too much of a scholar to do that. But I'll confess to a very quick walk.

On the way back to the fountain, I noticed a group of women just off the path in a small clearing between the trees. Their expressions and postures were quite sexual, almost feral with desire. Certainly they were not students. They writhed and stretched out long fangs toward me. I found the lack of pupils in their eyes alluring. It was not just with academic interest that I left the path and approached them.

One, a little closer than her sisters, tangled her nails in the strings of my amulet somehow. TAKE IT OFF! she screamed telepathically. I began to do so, but as soon as I touched its protective design, the spell shattered into a million shards. VAMPIRES!

I did not bother to walk; I ran. And as I passed the fountain, I saw the redhead was gone, but something large and smelly started after me whispering what it had in mind, and I found the strength to run a little faster. I didn't stop until I reached my room where I locked the door, leaped into bed, and pulled the covers over my head. When I finally fell asleep, my dreams were all wrong; I knew it even in sleep.

I dreamed of the park and saw the redheaded lady. I dreamed of the unicorn and knew my colleagues would only want to dissect it to increase their unsympathetic knowledge. I dreamed of the cemetery and saw myself learning its secrets which would be of far more use to me than Seton. Even the vampires invaded my dreams, not with their bloodthirstiness, but with their inflaming desire.

Classes the next day seemed more boring and stifling than usual. After they were over, I went and reported Seton's conversation to the mercenary commander who called him in and fired him on the spot. My colleagues regarded my action as only proper.

They were mystified, then, when I left my post and could only assume I had gone into a retreat somewhere. When they discovered I had taken Seton's old job at the cemetery, they doubted my sanity, and now that they found out I married a redheaded "hussy" half my age, they know I am mad.

